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U.S. Said to Prepare Mideast Options

In an ominous development, President Carter has issued secret directives to the Pentagon to prepare the option of using nuclear weapons in the volatile Middle East.

There have been hints of such a possibility in the past. Carter's State of the Union address last January, for example, declared that "an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States [and] will be repelled by use of any means necessary..."

And Robert Komer, undersecretary of defense for policy, publicly stated that if conventional deterrents in the Middle East failed, the use of nuclear weapons would be considered. But in secret directives, the president has spelled out the nuclear option clearly and explicitly.

In Presidential Decision Memorandum No. 51, Carter outlined a new U.S. nuclear policy for the Middle East. But this memo was ignored in the furor over Presidential Directive 59, which changed U.S. missile targets in the Soviet Union.

The contents of PDM No. 51 and related documents, including a directive to the Strategic Air Command from Defense Secretary Harold Brown, are designed to "significantly degrade Soviet capabilities to project military power in the Middle East-Persian Gulf region for a period of at least 30 days."

To accomplish this, the president ordered the formulation of various military options, my associate Dale Van Atta has learned. The most significant of these was the "limited strategic option" for use by the commander of the Rapid Deployment Force, Gen. P.X. Kelley.

Subject to the usual presidential authorization for use of any nuclear weapons, this option involves 19 nuclear bombs carried by B52 bombers. The aim is to keep Soviet forces from invading Iran, and the weapons include both B57 bombs, with an explosive power about equal to the Hiroshima bomb, and the more powerful B61 variable yield thermonuclear bombs.

Sources said Carter ordered his planners to formulate several additional limited strategic options, as well as a more far-reaching "selective attack option" that would target Russian facilities near Iran, including military bases and airfields inside the Soviet Union.

Military experts noted that with a B52 force — the SAC's 57th Air Division at Minot Air Force Base, N.D. — already earmarked for Middle East deployment, the bombers would be the most likely vehicle for nuclear weapons, rather than long-range missiles in silos in the United States. The bombers are far more flexible, one source pointed out, adding, "If we screw around with our ICBMs, you don't know what the response would be."

"Flexible" does not mean "reasonable," however, in the view of some insiders. They contend that the concept of limited nuclear warfare confined to the Middle East is a child's dream that could become a nightmare for the whole world.

"If we initiate tactical nuclear warfare in that area, we are opening a Pandora's box," said one Pentagon source who is alarmed at the idea of preparing strategic options for the Middle East. "The Soviets could respond with tactical nuclear weapons against our warships in the Persian

Gulf area, and who knows where it would go from there?"

Footnote: A White House spokesman refused to confirm or deny the contents of PDM No. 51, or to discuss U.S. nuclear policy with respect to the Middle East.

(Pentagon spokesman Thomas Ross said yesterday that "Presidential Directive 51 does not 'outline a new U.S. nuclear policy for the Middle East.' In fact," Ross said, "PD 51 does not mention the Middle East in any way whatsoever.")

Mismanaging the News — Once again President Carter is trying to manage the news. His subordinates leak sensitive information that makes him look good, such as the top-secret testing of the "invisible plane," but try to suppress information that makes him look bad.

Saturday morning [Sept. 20], CIA Director Stansfield Turner asked me to kill the Monday [Sept. 22] column because he feared it might jeopardize security. Saturday afternoon, a White House press aide charged that the same column was false. The president cannot have it both ways. If the column was false, it could not possibly jeopardize security.

If fact, the story is true, and the president knows it. I withheld many details, including direct quotes, to protect security. The charge that the column could damage efforts to free the hostages is pure rhetoric. The truth, as the president knows, is that my columns have helped the secret negotiations. By citing the danger of a Soviet-American confrontation in Iran, my columns have spurred Iranian leaders to resolve the hostage issue.